3: Fulop--1 E-5 (1953) 1954 SQ19 Tucano SQ19

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# Aspects of Tukano /Tucano/ Culture: Cosmogony

by Marcos Fulop

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/99/ Commissioned by the Dirección of the Instituto Colombiano de Antropología, we are initiating ethnographic studies among the natives of the Comisaría Especial del Vaupes. We have considered it convenient to begin the anthropological study of the cultures of this region with the Tukano /Tucano/ group.

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[101] The material that is published below was gathered during our stay in the settlement of Guadalajara, on the Paca River, from June 13 to July 9, 1953. Our informant was Marcos Sierra, 124 and Manuel Sierra, the brother of the preceding, served as interpreter. 128 Owing to the short time of the investigation and to having consulted only one informant, we are not able to guarantee 772 the exactitude of the version of the Tukano cosmogony given by 772 Marcos Sierra. 769 This cosmogony is repeated in the manner of a cult to the ancestors during the feasts of Dabukurí and Yuruparí.

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[171] The Tukano culture is actually representative of the cultures of the tropical forests of South America. Their regimen of life is sedentary; they practice horticulture, and bitter yuca (1)

1. Manihot utilissima.

constitutes the basis of their alimentation, which is supplemented with products obtained by means of hunting and fishing; they are efficient in the construction and handling of river vessels; they use the hammock for a bed; they possess the art of ceramics and do not know metalurgy.

131 The Tukano Indians are found located on the lower Vaupés /Uaupés/ River, from the falls of Ipanoré to the outlet of the Vaupés into the Río Negro; on the Tiquié and Papurí /Papury/ rivers; and on small streams that empty into these three rivers.

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291 feminine dress by the Tukano Indians. Nevertheless, it is still
177 possible to encounter Tukano Indians, male and female, who
797 reject occidental clothing, and this occurs primarily among persons of advanced age and in general among natives who reside quite far from any religious Mission.

527 For special feasts, such as the Dabukurí, ornaments of
302 brightly colored feathers are used by the men. For these feasts
[301] both men and women paint the face, the body, and the extremi-
[824] ties with carayurú, which is a pigment obtained by the fermentation of the leaves of Bignonia chica or by boiling the water in which these leaves have been soaked.

527 In the decoration of the skin by means of pigments for the
302 feast of Dabukurí, it is always the woman who applies the paint
571 to the man, besides dressing him with his garb of feathers. If the man is married, it is his only wife or the principal wife, in case he has several, who assists him. In the case of a single man, any woman of the community does this work, and the single man contracts with this woman the same obligations and the same rights that a compadre has toward his comadre in the Colombian
302 Creole culture. Besides painting the skin for occasions as
[751] esteemed as the feast of the Dabukurí, the daily painting of the
[413] face is common. In this case, the function of the pigment is simply aesthetic or for protection from the sun. In the decoration of the body and the extremities, /104/ cylindrical wooden pintaderas, which imprint geometric decorations, are used.

301 Another decoration used by Tukano women and girls is the
177 necklace of glass beads acquired from the rubber workers by means of barter, and there are also necklaces of mammal teeth obtained as a by-product of hunting and silver necklaces made from the coins that they get from the Creoles settled in the region.

• 105 The subject of social and political organization, as well as the life cycle, will be dealt with extensively at another time. For the moment it suffices to say quickly that the Tukano Indians have patrilineal extended families, they have patrilocal residence, they practice polyandry, marriage is carried out by means of

•105 /104 cont./
abduction, they practice the couvade, there is segregation of the woman during menstruation, there are initiation ceremonies for the boys who have reached puberty, and there is social stratification with castes.

177 [797] Since the arrival of the religious Missionary and the rubber worker in the region, two important phenomena have occurred. The most significant and most noticeable one is the rapid incorporation and diffusion of occidental material culture. The aluminum pot has replaced the pottery bowl, trousers have replaced the loincloth, the cotton dress has taken the place of the tree-bark skirt, hunting is no longer done with bow and arrow, but with a shotgun, and fishing is more often done with the fishhook than with the trap.

[182] [797] [584] [601] [595] [178] In the field of spiritual culture the influence of occidental culture has been more subtle and not so rapidly accepted. It is certain that the system of social organization is suffering a process of disintegration; the Indian who wishes to have a woman must be willing to settle in a mission, because the Missionaries have shrewdly gathered together all the women of marriageable age and have taken them to the Missions; the kinship terms no longer correspond to the present system; very few Indians still practice polyandry; but in spite of all this evidence, an adult Tukano Indian of today has not stopped thinking according to the typical Tukano mental processes. For example, Manuel Sierra, our interpreter, in spite of having lived for four consecutive years with his wife in the Departamento del Tolima, in Central Colombia, and in spite of having left the Vaupés at 17 years of age, still has the /105/ conviction that having eaten fish after the birth of his son without a Tukano shaman's having "blown" the food beforehand was the cause of the appearance of ulcers on his legs.

[262] [753] [178]

773 177 [128] [014] The Tukano cosmogony presented below shows clearly the phenomenon of the transculturation. The short time available for this first journey of contact with Tukano culture did not permit us to check this cosmogony with other informants. Our informant, 115 756 Marcos Sierra, is a shaman in the settlement of Guadalajara, on the Paca River.

6: Moser and Tayler E.N-5 (1960-1961) 1967 SQ19 Tucano SQ19

# *Epilogue*

## 1. COLOMBIAN KALEIDOSCOPE

It was July before we left the Motilon. Nearly ten months had passed since we first set out. We had visited four Indian tribes, each for a few weeks, and had had a glimpse at a fifth. Now it seemed time to take stock, not only of what was left to do, but of what had already been done. What in fact had been done? All our experiences seemed fragmentary, superficial. We had a veritable kaleidoscope of memories of Indians – impressions, no more.

Perhaps it would have been better to have lived with one tribe during those ten months and learnt more about them. But then we would have defeated our purpose which was to record the music of several tribes. Had we lingered with one group we should never have completed the whole. This was always our dilemma. But what could we have gained by staying longer? None of us, with the exception of Nestor, was academically qualified to study an Indian tribe, and to our misfortune he could come on only two of our journeys. What were we then? Perhaps we could have called ourselves adventurers or explorers, but these names are anachronisms in the twentieth century. Perhaps we were just travellers, human beings trying to catch a glimpse of another kind of man, the South American Indian, that strange perceptive being who is fast disappearing off the face of the earth.

What surprised us most was the diversity of these Indians. One tends to think all Indians alike, living in primeval forest, wearing barkcloth and covered in paint. But every Indian we met was very much an individual personality. Some were gay, others sad, some shy, others aggressive, tall, short and fat, fine-looking and ugly; taken as a whole one might describe them as introspective, reserved and very independent.

Like the individual, the tribes also were diverse, each one to a greater or lesser extent influenced by its environment – Noanamá, Tukano, Kogi and Motilon, and also Guajiro, though of these last our impressions were as fleeting as our days among them were few.

The four tribes could be more simply classified by grouping the Noanamá and Tukano together. They were living under fairly similar conditions, those of the tropical forest. Their fishing and hunting existence was in many respects alike, as was much of their material culture. Moreover, in the social sense, both tribes showed an absence of any central authority or chieftain;

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171 the only authority lay with the heads of the houses, and the considerable
105 but not excessive influence of the shaman. In addition, the family groupings within the scattered forest *malocas* and waterside stilted houses, in the ceremonies and, to a lesser extent, their art and music, all seemed to show a certain relationship.

They recognized a supreme being. He had little effect on their everyday lives, he was something remote but nevertheless present. What the Tukano called him we never knew – he may have been Jurupari; to the Noanamá he was Evandama. There were also the spirits of the forest and the ancestors. To them Severiano sang his Canta Haí, to them the Tukano shaman chanted during the festival on the Piraparaná. There was the custom among Noanamá boys and girls of putting flowers in their hair and in the holes bored in their ears, which prompted Nestor to remark that they were almost Polynesian, and we found later that the Tukano had the same habit.

There were differences too: the partly sedentary cultivation of the Noanamá and their dependence on maize, compared with the shifting agriculture of the Tukano and their staple of manioc. There were differences in craftsmanship and design: pottery, basket weaving and the methods of making canoes, to mention but a few.

But what does all this tell us? Here were two peoples living six hundred miles apart, divided by the high Andes. It only tells us that at some time in the past there was a contact, perhaps a migration, or even that they formed one major group which was divided by the Chibcha advance.

The Motilon and Kogi – and this includes the Bintukua – were essentially highland dwellers, the one living in the lower 'cloud forest', the other in the high savannah tundra. The most noticeable thing about them was that they wore clothes; the Motilon a long cloak reaching to his ankles, the Kogi a jerkin, trousers and a sash. They had developed the use of the loom and wove cotton, *fiqué* sisal and even wool, unlike the forest dwellers who would still have gone naked or worn barkcloth but for the influx of trade cotton. Moreover, they rarely used body paint. We only once saw a Motilon painting his face – which they do when they go to war.

Perhaps their most distinctive feature is that, unlike the tropical forest dwellers, they live in small settlements and villages: the wattle-walled houses of the Sierra de Perijá with the surrounding barricade as a defence against the depredations of wild animals and warlike neighbours, and the small, round, wattle-and-daub temples and houses of the high Sierra Nevada.

It has been said of the Amazonian Indian: 'One word from the chief and everyone does exactly as he pleases.' This is a dictum which could apply equally to the Tukano or the Noanamá. In a way this lack of authority, this

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*Guajiro women take in water from* Rigtender.
[See p. 178-A]

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nonchalance seems to add to their charm, it makes life a little happy-go-lucky. But not so with the highlanders. Here one senses authority and a martial spirit, particularly among the Motilon who were always itching for a fight; frustrated perhaps at being unable to fight other groups, they resorted to fighting amongst themselves, always clutching their sheaves of arrows and twanging their bowstrings in anger. Here – and among the Kogi too – we found aggressiveness; underneath they were still the same humorous, perceptive people, but outwardly they wore an air of purposefulness, as if life had become a serious matter. To the Kogi life had become more than that; they had a duty to live by the rules of their priests. This was the wish of their mother goddess Nabulwé, the supreme power in their lives. It seemed to us at the time that a Kogi set down beside a Tukano would have found him as alien to his conception of a human being as we ourselves were; yet both are Indians.

The most primitive of all South American Indians is the wandering nomadic Maku, still to be found in the isolated depths of the Amazon forests, living solely on what he can gather with a stone axe as his only implement. He still represents Stone Age man. At the other end of the scale is the monotheistic Kogi, the nearest present-day equivalent we saw to the highest state of culture the Indian has reached. Between these extremes are such tribes as the Tukano, Noanamá and Motilon, each in a sense representing a different stage in development.

On the one hand are cultural traits which denote common origin or the influence of early migrations. On the other hand is the diversity representing stages of social development which were still evolving at the time of the Spanish conquest and which since then have each, in varying degrees and at different times, been subjected to a completely new force – European culture in all its complexity.

And how did the different tribes react to this influence? Generally speaking, the forest lowlanders like the Tukano have survived longer because of their remoteness. Yet when a contact is made the shock is great and their lack of cohesion may lead to rapid extinction.

The highlander, who in most instances has been in contact with the European for centuries, has – perhaps because of the greater cohesion imposed by the Kogi priests and the Motilon chiefs – either wholly resisted or adapted himself to the new influence in such a way that much of his own culture is incorporated in the new, as has happened in Atanquez, and indeed in the case of countless thousands who in the past four and a half centuries have become fully integrated into a European society.

There are very few places left in the world where the notion of Western

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*Ortelia, Kechenko's sister.* [see p. 178-B]

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105 culture is unknown. There may still be one or two isolated hill tribes in New Guinea; and wandering-nomadic groups of foresters like the Amazonian Maku. The Tukano certainly were not isolated in this sense. Some of them had had direct contact with the rubber collectors of the early part of the century, and many of them today still tap rubber. It is possible that the obvious signs of depopulation among the people of the Piraparaná are due to this yearly migration of the younger men. Essentially, however, they remain simple uncomplicated people believing in an amazing world of spirits and demons and quite happy in that belief; taking part in their festivals with great gusto; extremely creative with their beautiful head-dresses, woven baskets and pottery, to mention but a few of their artefacts, and delighting in their music. Perhaps we influenced them unduly in this last respect. Perhaps when we left, the panpipes were put back on their neglected wall. But this is unlikely.

Nor were the Noanamá completely isolated. Among them one felt a growing conflict between the negro settlers and the Indian. We recalled an argument between Severiano and an old negro: in a rage Severiano had shouted, 'Respect me!' Perhaps the negro's cheerful arrogance infuriated the Indian more than the taking of his land. Then there was the Mission. We had seen Severiano calling to the ancestors with his Canta Haí sticks in front of him, facing a lighted candle under an image of the Virgin Mary. The Indians were gradually disappearing from the San Juan and moving northwards to Panama, in a pathetic attempt to continue the only way of life they knew.

But the Motilon were different, and the Kunuguasaya had adopted an openly hostile attitude towards all intruders. To this day they remain, like the Maku, almost unknown – but not because of inaccessibility or remoteness. The Yuco-Chaké, however, whom we visited, though still extremely warlike among themselves, are not so much under the influences of *colono* expansion from the plains as of the work of the missionaries.

000 If only in the past the missionaries could have concentrated less on the outlawing of those aspects of tribal life which constituted the very basis, the very roots of Indian existence – their spiritual and ceremonial life, which ran completely contrary to the teaching of Christianity. If only they could have restrained their overwhelming zealousness to eradicate these and tried to understand them and show tolerance instead. Then the inevitable shock to the Indians would have been less – of losing their own beliefs in the face of a religion apparently far more terrible, one that involved only one alternative to eternal damnation and hell, which was so totally at variance with their own charming optimism for a better life to come. This was followed by a second more lasting shock, the realization that few but missionaries really practised this faith – and to the Indian religion was part of his being. Then their despair and disillusion could have been softened.